THE CATALYST

Forging ahead by conquering the trauma in my past

Haunted by a father's bipolar-fueled volatility, I outran trauma for decades—until the pandemic forced me inward. Through compassionate listening, yoga, therapy, and Michael Singer's teachings, I learned to detach, revisit rather than relive, and forgive.

By: Cam Scholey | Posted: October 6, 2022

This blog post discusses trauma

Until recently, I had spent much of the 55 years of my life being chased by my past, staying one step ahead of it. It's a past I wanted to run from, needed to run from.

In the 1970s, bipolar 2 was called manic depression. It was treated with lithium and sometimes shock therapy. I know this because my father was diagnosed with manic depression in the early 70s. Actually, for me, it was like having three fathers. There was the angry, reckless, violent one, and the sullen, withdrawn one that lies in bed for days, won't make eye contact and talks about dying. But there was also the well-meaning, hard-working one, the poet who has vision, who loves his kids and is proud of them, and is going to give them a great life.

Learning at a young age to live life walking on eggshells leads to much confusion, doubt, and fear.

When I was twelve I was removed from my father's custody and moved far away, but I was always nervous, looking over my shoulder – I knew he would come back one day. He did return when I was eighteen. I wasn't home at the time, but if I had been there, what would have happened? I'll never know. I do know that, even though I was now bigger and stronger than him, I was still petrified.

He died young, when I was in my mid-twenties – lithium had taken a large toll on his brain. While a certain fear was now behind me, the years ahead would actually be worse for me. His death marked the beginning of three decades of flashbacks, panic attacks, bouts with alcohol, and even the occasional suicidal thought.

How well I hid all of this – most of the time anyway. I dabbled in some therapy, which was helpful, and while I tried hard at various times I really should have stayed with it more. I immersed myself in my career, academics, and athletics – a busy, distracted mind is one that can stay a step ahead of the past.

Until a pandemic comes, that is. In short order, my days went from 95% full to just 5% full. And I was alone – the border was closed so my uncle couldn't return to Canada. When the initial shock of the pandemic was over, and I couldn't distract myself by looking outward, I was forced to do what I needed to do – look inward. I'm fairly introspective so once I got started on this path, I

gained momentum quickly.

In 2021 I realized the time was perfect to take courses I've always wanted to take, but never had the time or energy. I took a writing course, which rejuvenated my passion for writing. And the course I found most transformational was a compassionate listening course – very inspiring. I learned much about spirit and values, and the gift of listening –most importantly, I learned how much more I need to learn!

I also started listening to podcasts. One of my favourites is Oprah Winfrey's Super Soul Sunday. I found some of her guests so intriguing I began listening to their podcasts, like Michael Singer for example. There's no question, 2021 was a year of minor awakenings for me.

Fast forward to January 2022, when I was listening to a Michael Singer podcast about being able to detach from traumatic life events. The message I was getting is how to lean away, to relax when anxiety-inducing thoughts creep in. I could feel it working, I could feel I was gaining more control over my negative thoughts.

I tested it with a few 'small-t' trauma events, and it worked – in my mind's eye, I pictured myself leaning back and away from the thoughts – I could detach from them while I experienced them. The real test, I thought, is the one 'big-T' trauma event in my life: the one where my father had to scuttle me out of town for a week.

It worked! I could "watch" the traumatic event "from a balcony in the corner", instead of from the up-close perspective of a helpless child. Suddenly and all at once, the years of on-and-off therapy, the helpful podcasts, the yoga, my own stubbornness – they all came together in an epiphany. Just like that, I could *re-visit* traumatic events, instead of feeling constantly forced to *re-live* them in flashbacks. What a truly liberating feeling.

By February I had forgiven everyone previously on my "unforgivable" list. And I understand now how forgiving someone isn't a win for them, it's a win for the forgiver – and that has it's own special kind of liberation. I realize now that there are no villains in my narrative, just a few villainous acts.

While I still have more psychological tidying up to do, I feel like I have had a real breakthrough, a major step toward peace and fulfillment. To keep that moving forward, my regime includes the following:

- **Getting back into yoga**. I became addicted to hot yoga about 10 years ago – it feels like a moving meditation, with immense health benefits to both body and mind. The pandemic halted that, plus I moved, so I'm now slowly getting back into it. I'm currently practising regular yoga using YouTube videos (many great ones!) and look forward to getting in into a studio of any temperature soon.
- **Learning more and engaging in topics around compassionate listening, kindness, gratitude, spirit, and values.** The compassionate listening course I took was transformational for me. Admittedly I'm a novice at these, and I know that the more I learn, and the more I apply my learnings, the more I can evolve and try to help dial down the temperature in our increasingly polarized world.
- **Writing about and sharing my story**. Until the epiphany, there were many things I couldn't talk about. And even now, there are a few things I can't bring myself to talk about. But I can write about them. And I am. Like this blog. I'm also writing a memoir, which I hope to get published next year. I find if I write about it, I stop ruminating about it.

- **Focusing more on community and service**. Giving back is win-win – it helps someone in need, and it makes the giver feels great. I intend to do this much more frequently. Now that I can talk about my story, I plan to be as helpful as I can to others who are struggling with the same issues I've dealt with.
- **Seeking therapy as needed**. I have admittedly been very haphazard when it comes to seeking therapy; if my anxiety hits certain threshold levels, I seek help. I naïvely thought I was out of the woods when I had my epiphany but writing the memoir has required walking down certain dark and scary corners of my memory banks – this has made clear to me that, while my anxiety levels are much improved, they still exist. So, I plan to be more proactive in managing this.

I realize that, while I may have made great strides and had great awakenings in a short time, it has been a long-term process. All my efforts, everything I did to try to help myself, were all steps to getting me where I need to be. It took me a long time to get here but I never gave up. It takes hard work and dogged persistence to conquer trauma, but I got there, and you can too.

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An MBA and Fellow CPA, whose career focus has been primarily on strategy and people. In the twilight of a rewarding career in business consulting, teaching university, and writing about strategy, Cam's future plans include writing, speaking, and teaching more about dealing with trauma, and matters related to fulfillment in life. He is currently writing a memoir.

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